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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

19 September 1983

LEBANON: Implications of Major US Tactical Support
for the Lebanese Armed ForcesSummary

Heavy US airstrikes and naval bombardment would disrupt and weaken Druze and Palestinian forces in the mountains overlooking Beirut and send a clear signal to Damascus about US intentions. The Lebanese Army is holding its own along the Alayh ridgeline, and its main vulnerability now is a shortage of ordnance. US strikes, especially if Syrian positions were hit, would risk provoking Syrian retaliation, and probably would encourage the Christian right to believe the US was committed to the defense of minority Christian hegemony in Lebanon.

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A major increase in US support for the Lebanese Army, including heavy strikes against all artillery positions, ammunition dumps, and resupply convoys supporting the Druze and Palestinian ground forces, would weaken seriously the forces opposing the Lebanese Army. It would send a clear signal to Damascus that the US is serious about its support for the current Lebanese Government.

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Such strikes would eliminate temporarily Druze artillery support, although it is unlikely that they would cause significant casualties. Finding and destroying supply convoys would be more difficult. Any interruption of the flow of ammunition, however, would significantly weaken Druze combat capability. Successful strikes would also have an important

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positive effect on LAF morale. US support of the central government might also keep Shia leader Nabih Barri from striking a deal with the Syrians to use the Amal militia against Army units in the Beirut area. [REDACTED]

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Lebanese Army artillery and the Lebanese Air Force have been effective in disrupting enemy ground attacks and destroying a few supply convoys and artillery positions. Lebanese Army artillery, however, suffers from a chronic shortage of ammunition. It is evenly matched against Druze-Palestinian artillery in numbers, but is far superior in accuracy and coordination. Syrian artillery could tip the balance against the Lebanese Army, but as yet there is no indication of significant Syrian artillery support for the Druze-Palestinians. [REDACTED]

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The Lebanese Army, on its own, has bought time for the Gemayel government and, if it succeeds in capturing all the strategic points along the Alayh ridgeline, could strengthen the government's bargaining position. The Army, however, is losing men and material. Units in action probably are fatigued and may be vulnerable to a strong counterattack. [REDACTED]

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At the present time, a major US commitment does not appear necessary. Although the current offensive appears stalled, the Lebanese Army probably can hold its own, if it does not run out of ordnance or confront the Syrians directly. Its position is stronger than it has been since the beginning of the fighting and it is not immediately threatened with a tactical or strategic defeat. Morale is good, and performance is steadily improving as the Army learns its military lessons the hard but fast way. As the conflict continues, however, confessional tensions could easily erode the Army's fighting capability. [REDACTED]

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The Syrians, Druze, and Palestinians recognize the importance of the Alayh ridgeline and may attempt to take key positions such as Suq al Gharb and the area around Kayfun with a massive attack using artillery and ground assaults. They may attempt to inflict a serious defeat on the Lebanese Army that would reverse ebbing Druze military fortunes and possibly precipitate a rout among Lebanese Army troops. [REDACTED]

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To avert such a defeat, US support probably would be necessary. US participation would give the Army sufficient firepower to hold the Alayh ridgeline and seize remaining positions overlooking Beirut. US support might conceivably provide, at least temporarily, added incentive for the Druze to accept a ceasefire. [REDACTED]

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US strikes and bombardment, however, particularly if Syrian positions were hit, would risk escalating the Syrian role and provoking Syrian retaliation against US targets. The Syrians might calculate that they could exploit an increased US military role and turn an essentially domestic Lebanese conflict into a US-Arab confrontation. This could be

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played up by Damascus in an attempt to shift Arab sentiment in favor of Syria and to goad the Soviets in the hope of securing stronger backing from Moscow. [REDACTED]

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Even if a major US show of force sent a signal that Damascus heeded, it might send the wrong signal to the Lebanese Christian right. Unless concessions on political power sharing are extracted in advance from Christian hardliners, they would probably perceive large-scale US intervention as a commitment to the political status quo. Consequently, they would be even more resistant to meaningful concessions for a political dialogue that would follow a cease-fire. [REDACTED]

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Under these circumstances, a cease-fire, while buying time for the Gemayel government, would not lead to a solution of the underlying causes of the current civil strife. Reconciliation talks and the cease-fire would then gradually break down, and the US would find itself backing minority Christian hegemony in Lebanon. [REDACTED]

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